

“Happy Trails to You,” “Clear the Road,” “Trails for All Seasons”

by Dave Kenagy

“The road was like that of yesterday, along steep hillsides, obstructed with fallen timber and a growth of eight different species of pine, so thickly strewn that the snow fell from them as we passed,” wrote Capt. William Clark on September 14th, 1805, in the heart of the Rocky Mountains.

Most of the roads in the days of Lewis and Clark are what we would now call trails. Somewhere along the way we have come to think of roads as routes suitable for automobiles. So changes the “National Vocabulary.”

But, some things don’t change. Many of today’s trails on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge are routed along steep hillsides, and are often obstructed by fallen timber and encroaching alder, birch, and spruce trees. In time, these obstacles are removed by our backcountry crew, whose job it is to “clear the road.”

The trails that Lewis and Clark traversed in the West were defined not by axe and saw, but by footprints and hoofprints. But, the tools that their countrymen used back East to cut out new “roads” were not much different than those we use on the Refuge today.

Many of the trails on the Refuge have a long history, dating back to the early 1900s. They were made by hunters and trappers, and most were not made for horse use, but for hikers and packers. They are often winding and steep, and quickly ascend to the high country. The Bear Creek, Moose Creek, and Lake Emma Trails are examples of these early routes.

Of course, not all of the trails on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge are so old. Most of the trails along the Sterling Highway and Skilak Loop Road were made about 50 years ago. The canoe portage trails, and trails along Swanson River Road and Swan Lake Road are about 40 years old. The Headquarters ski trails are about 25 years old. There are two Refuge trails that are less than 5 years old, and we have one brand spanking new trail that will be completed this year.

Refuge trails vary not only in age, but also in character and purpose. Wilderness trails are usually narrow, winding and steep as is appropriate for federally-designated wilderness, and are maintained for back-

packers and hunters. We do minimal work on these trails to retain their wilderness character.

Portage trails on the canoe system are designed and maintained so that folks can carry and maneuver a 50 to 80 pound canoe through the woods without mishap. So, most are fairly short, not too steep, and provide a relatively firm tread.

Refuge dayhiking trails allow hikers to quickly reach a fishing hole, a favorite berry patch, or a grand view. Most are in pretty good shape, but some are a little rocky, a little muddy, and sometimes disappear in a sea of grass and wildflowers during late summer. We clear these trails in early summer and improve them as time and budget allows.

The Headquarters area has nature trails, dayhiking trails, and crosscountry ski trails; that’s plenty of variety in a small area.

This year we will be improving a number of trails on the Refuge to bring them to a higher standard. That means reducing grades, improving drainage, straightening winding areas, re-routing where necessary, and improving the walking surface.

Two Student Conservation Association (SCA) trail crews will be upgrading trails along Swanson River Road and Swan Lake Road, and building a new trail from the Outdoor Education Center to the Swanson River. These trail improvement projects are part of a bigger package that includes upgrades to campgrounds, boat launches, and trailhead parking areas. A third SCA trail crew will complete the final portion of the Vista Trail, above Upper Skilak Campground, and will finish installing boardwalk on Hidden Creek Trail.

The backcountry SCA crew will do their usual trail clearing by removing blowdowns and obstructions from all major trails and the canoe system. A new 5-person backcountry trail crew will tackle a significant upgrade of a dayhiking trail, and possibly a wilderness trail as a part of a specially funded project to improve trails on the Refuge.

The second half of the Centennial Trail, at Refuge Headquarters, will be completed along with a portion

of the Keen Eye Nature Trail to give summer hikers and winter skiers a more interesting trip through the woods.

Portions of the Nordic Lake Ski Trail, at Refuge Headquarters, will be re-routed to provide an all-season trail which can be used by hikers as well as skiers. For skiers, the upgrade means straighter run-outs on slopes, gradual grades on uphill, and nicer skiing, in general. We will retain the woodsy character of the trail.

Most of these trail upgrades will be done with hand tools, just as trail work has been done for generations. But, where appropriate, we will use chainsaws, brushcutters, and even power machinery such as mini-

excavators.

We do all this to “clear the road” for you, and all the visitors who use trails on Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. If you see any of the trail crews this summer, stop and talk with them, and give them a big thank you. If you have any questions about our trail program, feel free to contact the Refuge and talk with the trail crew leaders: Scott Slavik, our backcountry ranger, or Dave Kenagy, our volunteer coordinator.

Dave Kenagy is a park ranger/volunteer coordinator at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge who has been working on trails at the Refuge since 1983. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.